

The Mission Of the Religious Press

AN ADDRESS BY

Rev. Reverdy C. Ransom, D.D.

Before the General Conference of the A. M. E. Church
in Kansas City, Mo., May 16th, 1912



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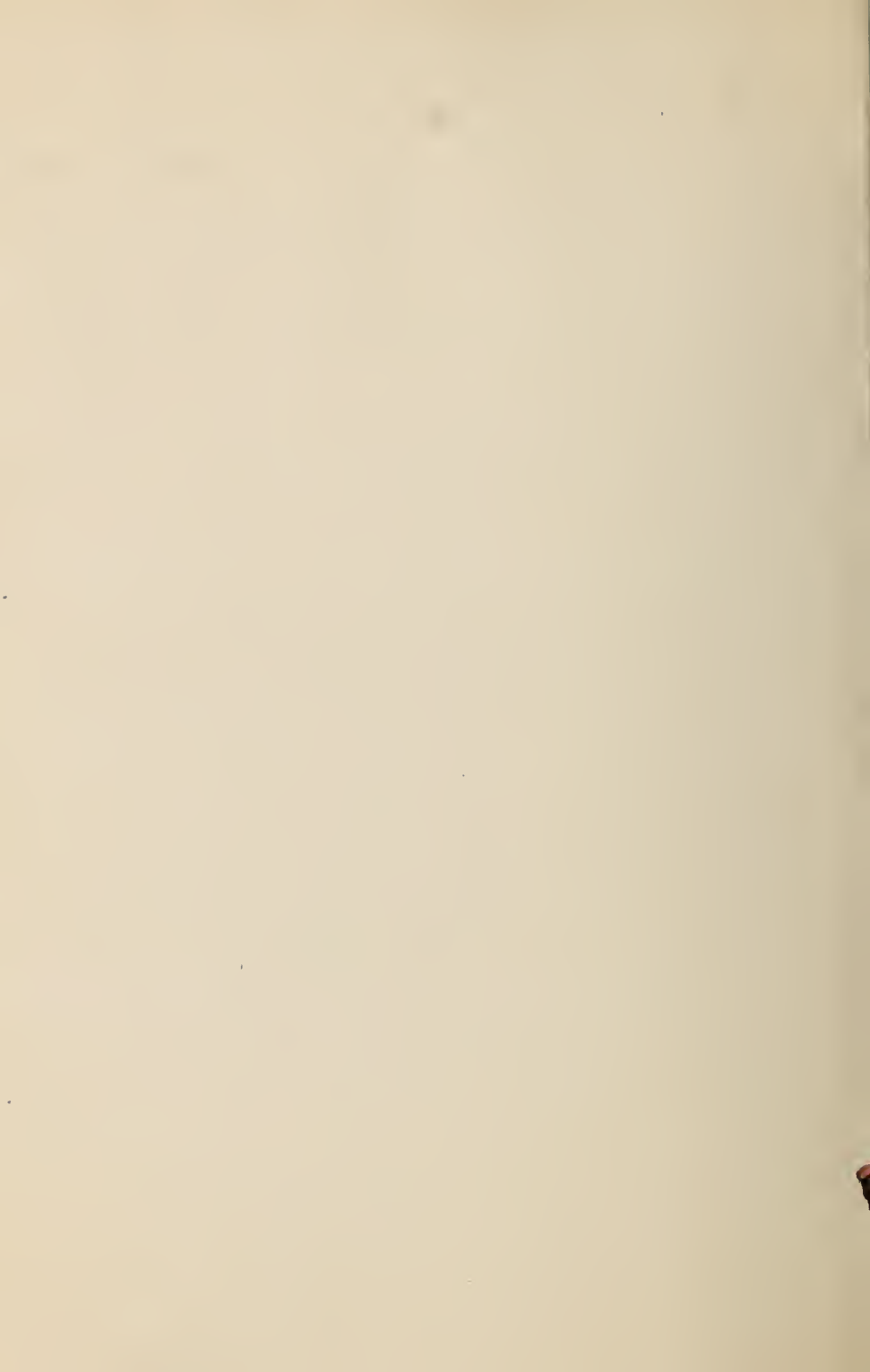
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The snowflakes that fall from heaven do not descend upon us in greater volume than the output of the ever-multiplying leaves from the printing press. Printer's ink mixed with brains is fast becoming both the morning and the evening meal of all mankind. It is made palatable alike to all by being seasoned and served to suit the varying and divergent tastes. A thinker harnessed to a printing press is the most powerful and influential force in modern civilization. It is superseding armies and navies as a means of national defense. By this subtle alchemy the modern world has become fluid, flowing into every current of human life. It has taken the best that the heart has felt and the highest that the mind has thought and rarefied it until it has become in our nostrils the very breath of life to humanity.

The press is the servant of every cause and purpose under the sun. It is employed by the statesman to unfold his policies of government; trades and commerce use it to exploit their schemes and display their wares; it portrays the artist's vision and sings the poet's song; the scientist and philosopher make it the vehicle of their thoughts, while the religious teacher and thinker make it a lever for the moral and spiritual elevation of the world.

The pen has always been at the service of religion. The hieroglyphics traced upon the broken columns that have lain for ages buried among the ruins of Babylon and Egypt testify to the gropings of the ancients after God, before the dawn of history. The poets and sages of Greece and Rome struck their noblest strains by invoking the immortal gods. When Jehovah would communicate His commandments to Israel, He let down His throne on Mount Sinai in the midst of thunders, lightnings, thick clouds of smoke and the voice of a trumpet exceeding loud, and delivered to Moses the Ten Commandments written upon tablets of stone with a pen of iron.

Christianity is not in a book. It is not the result of a literary propaganda. Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, and one of the most influential personalities in the world's religious history, wrote nothing; John the Baptist wrote nothing, and Jesus Christ, the founder of our faith, wrote nothing. He was the bearer of a divine light and life that has unloosed human tongues, given to thousands "the pen of a ready writer," and set the printing presses of the world to revolving night and day with the work of sending forth messages more far reaching than the flying roll which the prophet Zechariah saw speeding across the heavens. Jesus Christ stands at the center of human life. He is the hub around which the course of history must revolve from Eden to Calvary and from the snow-clad heights of Mount Hermon to the gates of Paradise. St. John concludes his gospel by saying that

"There are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written."

While He wrote nothing Himself, there is a sense in which we may say, with reverence, that the Holy Ghost acted as the press agent of Jesus Christ. Under the inspiration of the Spirit the gospels were written; under His direction the Epistles were written by the Apostles to the primitive Christians.

What the future of Christianity, Christian civilization and the Christian institutions that have sprung from it, would have been without the written or printed page, transcends the bounds of the most extravagant imagination. The debt that theology owes to the writings of the Apostle Paul is incalculable. On a certain morning in the spring of the year 58 A. D., there stood on one of the wharves of the city of Corinth a middle-aged woman about to take ship to sail across the fair waters of the Gulf of Corinth for Rome. That woman was Phoebe, the deaconess of the church at Cenchrea, and Paul's sister in the Lord. To her Paul entrusted a roll of manuscript which was the Epistle written from Corinth to the church which was in Rome. This Epistle was of such consummate importance to the future of Christianity that Renan makes the startling statement that Phoebe, as she sailed away from Corinth, "carried beneath the folds of her robe the whole future of Christian theology."

We hear a great deal to-day about Pauline Christianity, with the implication that he was the inventor of what may be called Evangelical Christianity. There are in the New Testament, broadly speaking, three sets of teaching—the Pauline, Petrine and Johannine, and you cannot find between these three any difference as to the fundamental contents of the Gospel; for if Paul rings out, "God commendeth His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us," Peter declares, "Who his own self bore our sins in his own body on the tree," and John from his island solitude sends across the waters the hymn of praise, "Unto him that loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood." So the proud declaration of the Apostle is warranted when he says, "Therefore, whether it were I or they, so we preach."

We would not be understood as so far misconceiving the phrase, "religious press," as to apply the term to the age of hieroglyphics or papyrus, nor yet to the writings of the Apostles or the Church Fathers. But as standing nearest to Christ, in point of time, they give us in literary form, authoritative data for the guidance of modern religious thought. Out of the darkness of the Middle Ages there flashed that flaming meteor, Savonarola, the immortal Florentine, who thundered his denunciations against the moral and religious corruption of the De Medici. Savonarola was the precursor of that brilliant galaxy of religious publicists among whom Erasmus and Melancthon shone as stars of the first magnitude. But it was not until the sound of the hammer that nailed Christ to the cross on the lonely hill of Calvary was echoed back by the sound of the hammer in the hands of Martin Luther as he nailed his theses to the door of his obscure Wittenburg

church, that the introduction to the religious press was written. However the historian may date the beginnings of modern progress from the Renaissance, we hold that it was out of the fires of the Reformation that the religious press forged for itself white wings with which to carry the world forward through the successive stages of its spiritual and moral progress.

The victorious armies of Napoleon, which brought all Europe to his feet, until the sun of that mighty Corsican went down at Waterloo, and the thundering hoofs of Cromwell's Invincible Ironsides that overturned the British throne, were no more belligerent than was the tone of the religious press in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries. Its utterances censored, its voice often muffled or suppressed, the heroes and martyrs in this cause take first rank among those who have won for us those foundation stones of democracy—freedom of the press and freedom of religious belief.

The mission of the religious press is no longer polemical. The armor of controversy has been discarded for the peaceful robes of tolerance. It has exchanged the sword of bigotry for the torch of fraternity and co-operation. It is not so much concerned about the character of a man's doxy as it is about the quality and worth of his service.

The religious, or denominational press, like the denominational school, has a field and a mission distinctively its own. Its aims are not simply utilitarian. The secular schools and colleges are employed in the production of intelligent American citizens; their training may be vocational or cultural. The religious or denominational schools may give this training no better than others. Our literary inheritance and the truths of science and philosophy remain the same whether taught at Girard College or a Methodist seminary. The *raison d'être* of the denominational school does not consist in the fact that it makes new contributions to knowledge, but in the application of education to life, in sanctifying scholarship on the altar of character and dedicating the whole of the service of humanity. Its culture is not simply literary, scientific, or utilitarian, but moral and spiritual, releasing for service the highest and best capacities of the mind and spirit. Its aim is godliness; it places upon culture the stamp of Christ. It seeks not only to make intelligent citizens, but to prepare men for the duties and responsibilities of Christian citizenship.

Now, the religious press is not religious in the sense of teaching a particular form of religious belief, or of devoting its columns exclusively to the dissemination of religious intelligence. It is neither a mouthpiece nor an organ, limited to the narrow confines of denominational boundaries. While not a competitor of the secular press in the sense of being a moving picture screen for the daily life of the people, its field is the world. It should seek to uphold the loftiest Christian ideals, and apply the principles of Christianity to the actual conditions or events arising out of the life of the people. The newspaper and periodical press are too often the hired servant of partisan

politics and politicians, of business or moneyed interests, of industrial and commercial schemes.

First of all, the religious press must be free and incorruptible, and so far as human frailty will permit, unbiased. It should be prophet and seer, preacher and teacher, philosopher and guide. It should have the power of Elijah to call down sheets of flame upon unrighteousness in high places; it should have the vision of Isaiah to behold upon the mountain tops the hastening feet of Him who is building a highway for redeemed humanity; it should have the boldness of John the Baptist and make itself a voice, crying loud enough to awaken our valleys of unrighteousness, shake our mountains of prejudice and pride, and stir up our pleasure-loving and wealth-seeking Jerusalems to behold the Light of the world, who will make straight their paths; it should have the zeal and fire of the Apostle Paul, to bear witness everywhere, to Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, black and white, to the great moral principles necessary for the salvation of society as well as the individual.

The religious press should be absolutely divorced from partisan politics, dealing with principles rather than parties, and giving its influence to those men and measures that make for the most enlightened and beneficent statesmanship and policies of government. The political millennium, like other millenniums, is not something made to order, that will be bestowed upon us, being handed down by God from heaven. It is something that must be won, worked for, achieved. We do not believe, therefore, in a journalism that is inconsequential, supine, colorless; but one that has backbone, conviction, principle, on all the great questions of government which so vitally affect the moral, intellectual, social and industrial welfare of the people.

The religious journal should aim to be more than the mouthpiece of public opinion, following in the wake of public sentiment. It should seek to educate, influence and guide public opinion in the right direction. High moral ground is its place and plane. It should turn the light on evil doers and demagogues in church and state, expose rascality and corruption in religion, politics or business. It should know no race or country, defending the weak and oppressed, assailing tyrants and tyranny, injustice and wrong. It should stand for temperance, for law and order, for political and social justice and righteousness.

The editor of the religious journal should be like the man in Ezekiel's vision, who was "clothed with linen, and had a writer's ink horn by his side," and go through the midst of Jerusalem and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that uphold the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.

The religious press should deal with the great international and world questions of peace and war, arbitration, colonization and the exploitation and government of the backward peoples of the earth. The moral and religious aspects of the Protectorate of France over Morocco, of Italy over Tripoli, and the struggle of the Chinese masses to overthrow the Manchu dynasty, come legitimately within its pur-

view, as do such questions as the high cost of living through the control of the necessities of life in the hands of a few, the freedom of the Panama Canal to the ships of all nations, the use of the aeroplane in war, and the colonial policy of this democratic republic in dealing with Hawaii, Porto Rico and the Philippines. It should deal as courageously with the moral aspects of stealing Africa from the Africans in the day of freedom as it did with the question of stealing Africans from Africa in the days of slavery.

No matter what path we take, whether it leads across the battle fields of the nation from Bunker Hill to Appomattox, from the Declaration of Independence to the War Amendments to the Constitution, or from the establishment of Methodism in this country to the discovery of the North Pole, we can turn no important page of American history without finding that the Negro and the Negro question require special treatment. This holds true when we touch the field of journalism, particularly as it relates to the A. M. E. Church. The African M. E. Church was the first Protestant church born on American soil. It was not a protest against the assumptions of the Papacy, or against theological doctrine or dogma. It was founded on Mar's Hill doctrine, as propounded by St. Paul, and on belief in the spirit of Christian unity that fell upon the Church on the day of Pentecost. Our pulpit and our press have a distinct mission, and a special message for the Negro in particular, and generally for the dark-skinned races of mankind, namely, this—that the Negro has a soul and that Christ has not prepared for him an inferior brand of redemption; that the Negro is not only a man, but also a man in Christ Jesus; that he will submit to no discrimination at the altars of religion, and that he claims the right to enjoy freely every privilege and opportunity that the Church affords. Those Negroes who will submit to be held in tutelage to religious denominations and be a kind of bond servant, occupying an inferior place in the household of faith, whatever else they may be, they are not African Methodists. While others have worked along similar lines, we make bold to say that no single influence has contributed so powerfully to the production of manhood and character and to the demonstration of the Negro's capacity for self-government as the African M. E. Church.

The publications of our Church were called into being to uphold the ideals we have set before us, maintain the principles for which we stand, to stimulate our activities and to record and publish our accomplishments to the world. They are the guardians of our heritage—a heritage which consists less in the churches we have built, the schools we have established and the departments we have organized than in the possibilities created by the spirit and principles of Richard Allen, who, like Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees, left St. George's M. E. Church in Philadelphia and "went out, not knowing whither he went;" of Paul Quinn, that mighty leonine man with the heart of an angel, who blazed a pathway through the West; of T. M. D. Ward, with a voice as sweet as the music of many waters, who crossed the Western plains until he overtopped the mountains and

planted our banner at the portals of the Golden Gate; of H. M. Turner, R. H. Cain, J. A. Handy, A. W. Hayman, J. M. Brown and W. J. Gaines, who followed the victorious Northern armies, organizing our scattered people and starting them on the road to progress; and of Daniel A. Payne, the St. Paul of African Methodism, who laid for our young Timothys the foundation for an educated ministry and for all of our people the inspiration of sound moral and intellectual growth.

The press of our Church should not modulate its voice to harmonize with the popular cry of the hour; it should seek to educate, to instruct, to warn. As the chosen watchmen upon our denominational walls, our editors should be the first to see and give warning of the approach of an enemy or the presence of danger. They should declare it regardless of the personage or the source from which it came.

Our newspaper and periodical press should keep steadily in mind the fact that it serves not only the Church at home, but in Africa, Canada and the islands of the sea. It should therefore so guard its utterances as not to create friction or to arouse the hostility of foreign governments and thus jeopardize the interests of the Church. It should exclude from its columns all matter calculated to make our people in Africa and elsewhere lose hope and confidence in the high character of its administration and the nobility of its aims and purpose. "African Methodist" is our baptismal name. Like the name "Israel," which Jacob won when he prevailed over the angel at Jabbock Fords, our denominational name is a providence of God, which should be a star of hope and *in hoc signo vincas* to the teeming millions of our race in Africa and throughout the world.

Our newspaper press, not being influenced by political expediency, but the exponent of the highest type of Christian citizenship, is free to assail the red-handed lynchers and the indifferent public sentiment that condones their diabolical crimes. From its impregnable position it is free to shatter the American mud gods of Jim Crowism with arrows of justice shot from the bow of righteousness. It is free to meet in open tournament those journals that slander the race, pervert our democracy and dishonor Christianity. It should ring true and clear as the voice of a silver trumpet, on all the great moral, social and religious questions that affect the race, the Church and humanity.

More valuable than the diamond fields of South Africa, more priceless than the pearls of the Indies, is the undeveloped field of our Sunday-school literature. The loud-swelling fanfaronade which bursts forth intermittently, over presses bought and machinery installed, would be more pardonable if it were less sad. Admittedly machinery is a necessary means, on the mechanical side, for the production of literature. But above the sound and fury about great publishing houses and up-to-date printing plants, who among us has heard a single word uttered about the scope and quality of the publications we are to issue and the contents of the literature we are to print? We are suffering less from lack of up-to-date machinery than from up-to-date men; we are suffering less for the need of building a strong

publishing house, great as that need may be, than we are for building our youth into strong characters and a nobler manhood and womanhood. We must not continue to adopt into our denominational family literary children which are not the legitimate offspring of our brain. It is within the power of our Sunday-school literature to be a genuine inspiration to the youth of the race by illustrating its pages with stories of the successful struggles of poor black boys and girls to obtain an education, of the triumphs of Negro students in American and European universities, of the moral heroism of the black redeemers on the lonely circuits and missions of the rural districts, of our deaconesses, stewardesses and missionaries who are rescuing men and women from the jaws of death and the gates of hell in our great cities, of the city pastors who are hurling back the tides of iniquity in our modern Babylons, of how black men and women are rising to power and influence in the business world; yea, let them give us stories of the ministrations of our trained nurses, the splendid influence of our women's missionary societies, of the work of our colored women's clubs, and of the work of our Bishops, ministers and missionaries, in Africa and the islands of the sea. These things are chapters from the book of life and tend to make men strong to nobly strive to serve their day and enter into that life which is eternal.

Our periodical press, represented by the *Review*, occupies a unique place in journalism. It should give us the ripened fruit of Negro scholarship and an up-to-date record of his worthiest achievements in every department of endeavor. It is high time we were getting some of the results of Negro scholarship. What does the Negro scholar think about God? He has not spoken with the voice of authority since the days of Zephaniah, the black prophet, and of St. Augustine, the Negro, who was one of the greatest of the Church Fathers. The last word in theology and ethics has not yet been spoken, for the simple reason that the Negro is yet to be heard. All great peoples have had their vision of God and have told it to the world. Our magazine should discover our thinker and prophet, and give his message voice.

Not only in America, but throughout the Anglo-Saxon world, the policy of dealing with black or dark-skinned people on the basis of race or color has come not only to have the authority of law, but, with brazen assumption, claims the sanction of religion. Our magazine should meet these perverters of science and slanderers of God. It should seek and discover writers who can draw their weapons from the great arsenal of biology, anthropology and sociology, and refute the untenable scientific grounds on which the oppression of our race is justified.

All anthropologists of recognized authority now admit that the first man, or our palæolithic ancestor, had black or dark brown skin and hair which inclined to be spirally twisted in its growth. It is now known that color of skin and hair is only the effect of environment and that the white people are fair only because their ancestors

lived for thousands of years in sunless and foggy countries. Fairness is nothing else but lack of pigment.

Six centuries before the invasion of the Vandals, Hannibal sent his soldiers from Africa to Europe and from Europe to Africa. We know that in the early Middle Ages African Mohammedans reigned in Spain for more than five hundred years. The actual fact is now proven that many thousand years ago a negroid race had penetrated through Italy into France, leaving traces at the present day in the physiognomy of the peoples of Southern Italy, Sicily, Southern and Western France and the western parts of Great Britain and Ireland. We know that at the present day there are examples in Wales, Scotland and Ireland of peoples of distinctly negroid aspects. It is also a fact, as noteworthy as it is indisputable, that, with the doubtful exception of the Mongolian as represented by Japan, the Negro is the only non-Caucasian race which has so far furnished rivals to the white man in science, the arts, literature and mathematics. A Negro has been to the North Pole, there are famous Negro painters, musicians, novelists, botanists, legists, philologists, philosophers, engineers and soldiers, whose work is done in the white world in emulation with the first talent of Europe and America.

The printed page has superseded the spoken word as a means for the dissemination of knowledge. The carrying power of the human voice has but a narrow range. The preacher, lecturer or orator may at best address but a few thousand souls, but when the press takes up his words he may speak to an audience as vast as the circumference of the globe. The present opportunities of Negro journalism, religious or otherwise, hold potentialities of incalculable influence and power. There are more Negroes in the United States to-day than there were inhabitants in Great Britain when Shakespeare wrote Hamlet or Milton sang of "Paradise Lost;" there are more Negroes in the United States than there are Danes in the kingdom of Denmark, with Switzerland, the land of William Tell, added; more than there are Dutchmen in the kingdom of the Netherlands, with Greece, the land of song and story, combined. There are more Negroes in the United States to-day than the total population of the country in the days when Daniel Webster and Henry Clay, in statesmanship, and Lyman Beecher and William Ellery Channing, in religion, were at the zenith of their power.

The audience is assembled, the stage is set; we now await the rising of the curtain to reveal in the foreground the black Garrisonian journalist who will make good this solemn declaration: "I am in earnest. I will not equivocate. I will not excuse. I will not retreat a single inch—and *I will be heard.*"

Our religious press should voice the best conscience of the race, strengthen its moral backbone, keep the fire of God burning on the altar of religion, and slay the Nadabs and Abihus who would offer upon our altars "strange fire" before the Lord.

To-day the Negro youth are coming by the thousand from the best schools, colleges and universities in the land, skilled in all the learning of the ages. While the Church provides the columns of its publications as a vehicle for their thoughts, let our editors speak to them, as did "He that holdeth the seven stars in His right hand and who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks" speak to John on Patmos: "Verily, I say unto you, WRITE!"



